DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 305 720 EA 020 786

AUTHOR Erickson, John W.
TITLE The Next Step: Preparing Students for a Changing Society.
PUB DATE 89
NOTE 9p.
AVAILABLE FROM Publication Sales, Oregon School Study Council, University of Oregon, 1787 Agate Street, Eugene, OR 97403 ($5.00; postage and handling is $2.00 for U.S. billing, $3.00 for foreign billing).
PUB TYPE Information Analyses (070) -- Viewpoints (120) -- Journal Articles (080)
JOURNAL CIT OSSC Report; v29 n2 p1-7 Win 1989

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Change Strategies; *Educational Change; Educational Environment; *Educational Improvement; *Educational Trends; Elementary Secondary Education; *Futures (of Society); *School Demography

ABSTRACT

This article by the superintendent of the Lincoln County (Oregon) School District focuses on preparing the nation's children for the future. All students need to be prepared to deal with four aspects of their adult lives: employment, education, family, and self-fulfillment. Students must be educated and prepared to participate fully in a changing society where information processing and decision-making will be valued. An aging society, a wave of immigrants, and the heavy tax burden associated with needed social services will influence the decisions people make about their families. In a society where robots and electronic systems operate, people will enjoy an increasing amount of time that will not be associated with a work schedule. Students will have to learn time management and self-fulfillment skills. Recommendations for schools are offered with consideration of the above four aspects of life. (SI)

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OSSC REPORT

Oregon School Study Council/University of Oregon/Eugene, OR/Vol. 29, No. 2—Winter 1989

The Next Step: Preparing Students for a Changing Society

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OSSC REPORT

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The Next Step: Preparing Students for a Changing Society

by John W. Erickson
Superintendent, Lincoln County School District

This article has resulted from countless hours of reading and thinking about the future of our society and the preparations we must make in public schools. The central, organizing theme is the notion that our schools, currently offering K-12 education, ought to prepare young people for "the next step." Whatever comes next for students should be based upon academic preparations we have provided in the public schools we operate locally.

Armed with this concept as a way of organizing data and our available resources, I believe we can tackle the issue of trying to prepare young people for an uncertain, perhaps even unknown, future. It is not really our responsibility to make the choices for students, but we do have the duty to provide the widest possible range of options in order that students might be able to prepare themselves for the next step in their lives.

This approach offers us a chance to resist the temptation of becoming caught up in speculation about an imaginary future for which we can do little that is immediate and concrete. Rather, we ought to be examining what we think we know now and look for ways to use that knowledge to prepare students so they can make the important decisions for themselves.

It is intriguing to consider space stations, genetic transformation, robotics, and other amazing possibilities of the future. More helpful, I believe, would be for us to focus on the incremental changes we might make within the existing organizational framework of public education. Specifically, what can we do within the next several years to prepare students to participate fully in a dramatically changed society? What are the next steps for students and what are the next steps for those of us charged with the responsibility for providing leadership?

Preparation for Four Aspects of Life

All students will be faced with concerns about employment, education, family, and self-fulfillment.

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How students prepare for these aspects of their adult lives will be crucial, particularly in a knowledge-based economy.

Employment Depends on Information and Knowledge

The economy appears to stress the ability to gain access to knowledge and the ability to process information quickly and accurately. There are numerous indicators that we will no longer be the agricultural or industrial nation we once were. This third transformation offers great possibilities to young people who read well, write clearly, and who know how to use technology. Far less certain are the economic prospects for students who lack these entry level skills.

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This article and the accompanying demographic data were adapted from The Next Step: A Report to the Board of Directors, Lincoln County School District, *by Dr. John W. Erickson, superintendent.*

Some futurists predict a bifurcated society in which the "smart jobs" will be held by technocrats of various types and the "dumb jobs" will be relegated to those persons in service employment. The disappearance of the American middle class in such a society suggests that many students will not be able to enjoy the lifestyles of their parents and will have little opportunity to gain the financial stability a good job provides. The repercussions could be ominous.

Education Becomes Life-Long

If this country continues to become increasingly knowledge-based, education will become a life-long activity. Those persons who have the education initially and who attend to the changing educational demands of the society, particularly in respect to employment, will fare quite well. The most adaptive, most responsive, and most ambiguity-tolerant will prosper. Others will be among the incapable and unemployable. For many of our students, the prospects will be cheery and exciting; for many other students, however, the future is already nearly lost.

Family Faces Challenges

The Norman Rockwell image of the American family is virtually obsolete. Few families represent a unit where a father goes to work, a mother stays home, and two or more children attend school. The concept of "family" will undergo tremendous difficulties as the "Baby Boom" generation moves into the next decade. Increasingly, these people will be caring for children who are displaced in the technological society and for aging parents who will continue to live longer lives due to nutrition and advanced medical care.

The young adults having children will be overwhelmingly minority and third world representatives. Simple demographic projections serve to alert us to the astonishing changes in the family unit

John W. Erickson

and in the overall population. Today's students will face decisions about becoming parents as well as caring for aging relatives who will demand first-rate social services.

To some extent, the future has already been mortgaged. The "Baby Boomers" will continue to glut the employment ranks and will exert tremendous political and financial influence upon the youthful work force, hard pressed to compete in an international economic arena where knowledge and information processing will be our major area of contribution and focus. The burden upon those who work will be substantial and the competition for high-paying jobs will be fierce.

Self-Fulfillment Replaces Survival

Malthus was wrong. The world's population can be fed, even when fewer and fewer people are employed in agriculture. The major difficulties presently deal with politics and distribution systems. Abundant production occurs annually, and many countries are exporters of agricultural products. A small percentage of farmers can feed the world. This phenomenon is not unique. Fewer people need to work, and the amount of time they work is continually declining. What, then, will people do?

We have clearly moved from an earlier age when survival was the critical determiner of activity. In our present society, most people do not face daily challenges of finding food, clothing, and shelter. We live in the midst of abundance.

Consequently, the use of leisure time and the pursuit of individual fulfillment represent real challenges. If we no longer value ourselves, as many of us presently do, in terms of what work we perform, the likely replacement will be to value ourselves for the talent, interest, and achievements we make by ourselves and often for ourselves. In short, self-fulfillment in this society could become more of a goal than economic survival.

Certainly, this will be true for those young people who are employed in the future economy. Self-fulfillment will probably continue to be seen as a luxury for those students who are not prepared to compete in the information age.

This article develops these four strands of inquiry. What should we do to help young people prepare for a changing world where employment, education, family, and self-fulfillment will offer widely contrasting prospects?

I suspect the policy and administrative decisions we face will be important, but probably not in the sense of making sweeping, wholesale changes. I think we will find our best efforts to be directed at

DIVORCE AND FAMILIES

1 million children are affected by divorce each year.

AT THIS RATE:

1 of 3 white children and 2 of 3 black children will live in a single parent family by age 16.

Most will live in a fatherless home for 5 years.

1/3 of the white and 1/2 of the black remarriages end in divorce.

"Children are the living messages we send to a time we will not see." –Neil Postman

- More children are born to unwed mothers.
- More childhood years are spent in fatherless homes.
- Couples marry later and are quicker to divorce.
- Half of marriages this year will end in divorce. U.S. rate is highest in world.
- Three-fifths of children born this year will spend at least part of their childhood in a single-parent family.
- Such families, 90 percent of which are headed by females, account for more than one out of five families with children.
- One out of every five children born last year was born to an unmarried mother. Proportion is growing.
- Probably 15 percent or more of women now in their 20s or 30s will remain childless, far above historical rate of 8-10 percent.
- There are now about 2 million unmarried, cohabitating couples, and the number of people living alone (the never married, the divorced, and the widowed) has risen 1 1/2 times since 1965.
- Persons living alone account for almost one out of four households.
- The average size family, according to Census Bureau data, was down to 3.23 persons in March, 1985, compared with 3.70 in 1965. Predictions are for further drop to 3.07.
- There are now on average fewer parents, children . . . and other family members per family than ever before in our nation's history.
- In 1985, married couples with children under 18 accounted for only 28 percent of households.

Source: Rand Corporation's Population Research Center

the creation of options so that parents and their children can make informed choices when preparing for the future. There will be several possible next steps for children and there will be many for us, as well.

The Skills and Competencies Students Must Acquire

Education

Students must be educated and prepared to participate fully in a changing society where information processing and decision making will be valued. Young people from all types of backgrounds and socioeconomic conditions must be able to:

- Read and comprehend written information of varied types
- Write effectively, comfortably, and creatively
- Use mathematic and scientific concepts and procedures correctly
- Think clearly and solve problems rationally
- Communicate in different forms to multiple audiences
- Learn new skills, ideas, and approaches throughout a lifetime
- Develop independent responsibility for actions and decisions in the effort to reach the highest personal potential
- Accept ambiguity and develop flexible, responsive attitudes toward change and the unknown
- Understand the contemporary importance of history and geography
- Recognize the interrelationship of world economics and the role of profit in a capitalistic society

WHERE DO CHILDREN LIVE?

- 19 percent in traditional two-parent families
- 15 percent with female head of household
- 52 percent with women who work
- 53 percent with both husband and wife who work
- 14 percent of white children live with mother only
- 40 percent of black children live with mother only

- Appreciate art, music, drama, speech, dance, and other fine art forms
- Apply technology, gain access to information, and make decisions based upon data acquisition
- Maintain lifestyles that incorporate health, nutrition, and exercise
- Function in a pluralistic society involving complex ethnic and personal relationships

Employment

Obtaining and keeping a "good job" will be a challenging aspect of this future society. In a changing marketplace, students must be able to:

- Demonstrate mastery of the entry-level academic skills
- Possess an individually prepared plan (developed with family and school counselor assistance) to include a "professional quality" resume and a list of demonstrated competencies
- Complete a job application and interview
- Develop and maintain strong interpersonal skills when working with colleagues, employers, clients, and customers
- Accept criticism, take suggestions, and respond to new directions or priorities
- Follow directions, execute work, and report clearly
- Work collaboratively and individually, initiate work, make decisions, solve problems, anticipate outcomes, and function as "self-starters"
- Become "risk-takers" who possess confidence, assertiveness, and trust in themselves and in others
- Maintain personal hygiene
- Initiate and keep commitments
- Tolerate, even welcome, ambiguity, change, and uncertainty
- Use technology such as supercomputers, artificial intelligence computers, cables, satellites, electronic mail and transfer of documents, funds, pictures, languages, and related data
- Perform work in flexible, nontraditional time slots that will be determined by the 24-hour applications of robotics and electronics
- Achieve personal satisfaction from work performed, assigned, or contemplated

Of every 100 children born in Oregon today:

- 12 will be born out of wedlock
- 40 will be born to parents who divorce before the child is 18
- 5 will be born to parents who separate
- 2 will be born to parents of whom 1 will die before the child is 18
- 41 will reach 18 "normally"

The Future World of Work

- 70 percent of jobs for elementary children are unknown
- 70 percent of *those* jobs will be in the information area
- History of United States involves transition: Farmer—Laborer—Clerk
- 4 percent of Oregon State University School of Agriculture graduates will work on farms/ranches

Family

An aging society, a wave of immigrants, and the heavy tax burden associated with needed social services will influence the decisions people make about their families. Students in public schools must be able to:

- Make responsible choices about their own sexuality
- Face the harsh realities of a changing society where deferred consumer gratification and the gradual deterioration of the stereotypical middle class will create fierce competition for the best housing, schools, child and elderly care, and related social services
- Prepare carefully to accept the financial implications of family commitments that will include the young and the old
- Accommodate increased family demands that will include many forms of child care and complicated decisions about the roles of elderly Americans
- Share child-rearing and elderly care duties or accept substantially reduced standards of living
- Recognize the relationship among education, employment, and the quality of life available

Self-Fulfillment

In a society where robots and electronic systems

operate 24 hours per day, there is the possibility for individuals to use abundant amounts of time for activities that are not determined by a work schedule. Because of this emerging trend, students must be able to:

- Develop personal talents and interests
- Engage in life-time learning activities
- Discover individual and collective areas of human growth, satisfaction, and recreation
- Strike a balance among community services, social roles, and altruistic interests
- Appreciate nature and beauty in the world
- Create meaningful personal and aesthetic dimensions in their lives
- Find opportunities for creative and reflective activities
- Free themselves from routine or mundane tasks by learning to use emerging technology
- Recognize the humanities as offering an immense arena for education, entertainment, enlightenment, and pleasure

Oregon Out of 50 States

- 30th in population (2,633,000)
- 20th in Hispanic population (65,000/2.5 percent)
- 18th in foreign-born (4.1 percent)
- 20th in over 65 population (11.5 percent)
- 40th in under 18 population (27.5 percent)
- 14th in median age (30.2 years)
- 27th in working women (50.2 percent)
- 15th in college graduates (17.7 percent)
- 8th in high school graduates (75 percent)
- 40th in married couple households (59 percent)
- 13th in per capita income ($7,600)
- 24th in household income ($16,780)
- 3rd in smallest household size (behind Florida and Nevada)
- 7th in born in another state (56 percent)

Recommendations for Schools

If we are to prepare students for a changing society, we must make changes ourselves. The following list is offered as a starting point for important discussions about these possible changes:

1. Education should begin earlier. Day-care, latch key, head start, extended day, summer school, and/or year-round school should be considered as new or increased educational opportunities.
2. The use of schools and their resources should be expanded. Schools have functions, such as international computer database access, that can be conducted 24 hours per day, every day of the year. Alternatives to the present use of time should be explored.
3. The use of technology should be increased. It is not enough to possess the emerging technology; we should use it in all possible areas of study. Clearly, technology offers the world to students.
4. The teacher role should be altered. The image of the teacher as a disseminator of knowledge should be replaced by the concept of the teacher as an expert learning facilitator. Teachers in the future should be prepared to use many forms of technology and other appropriate resources to help students acquire knowledge.
5. The student role should be changed. Traditionally, we have thought of students as the "products" resulting from the teacher's work. A better description might be to regard students as the workers whose activities are managed creatively by skilled teachers. Individual workers would become engaged in carefully designed lessons developed under the guidance of the teacher. This paradigm shift will be important specifically to make full use of technology and to accommodate individual student needs.
6. International languages, especially those of Pacific Rim nations, should be offered extensively. The study of languages and cultures should be promoted in early grades and developed significantly at the secondary level.
7. Interdisciplinary courses should be developed to teach history, economics, world geography, and international studies. Global alliances are changing and our students must be prepared to interact productively with widely varied cultures.
8. Choices for students and for families should be encouraged. Although all schools must operate effectively as units of larger organizations, some diversity should be permitted. If changes in

school operations occur, the resulting differences in learning environments should be used by families to place their children in the most appropriate settings.

9. Personalized educational plans should be developed for every student. This process should be initiated before the student enters high school and should include at least the recognition of academic, vocational, and personal needs anticipated by the student and the family. These plans should require extensive assistance by school counselors.
10. The ties to the business community should be strengthened in order to provide meaningful employment opportunities for young people. Every student who seeks employment should be armed with a professional-quality resume, the ability to complete a job application, and the experience of preparing for an interview.
11. Cooperative programs should be developed to provide child-care services and training. These programs should include a Teen Mothers component to offer educational opportunities to pregnant girls. Adults should be trained in this program to work in various child-care facilities. High school students should have this program available as a work-experience opportunity, as a parenting course, and as a child-care location for their own children. Other social service providers should be encouraged to participate. This same concept should be developed for elderly care, as well.
12. Support for staff development, particularly in respect to the use of technology, should be emphasized. We should invest in the wonderful human resources in our public school staffs.

Conclusion: Liberal Arts—The Core of Instruction

Most of the indicators of the future suggest this culture will continue to undergo a dramatic transformation. This change is essential if this society is to be preserved and if we are to participate fully in altered global relationships. The students in our schools will be the decision-makers who will determine the destiny of this nation.

> "In the end, more than they wanted freedom, they wanted security . . . . When the Athenians finally wanted not to give to society, but for society to give to them; when the freedom they wished for most was the freedom from responsibility, then Athens ceased to be free." —Edward Gibbon, Historian

We are not yet humanoids nor are we mindless keepers of the technological marvels in our midst. Rather, we are participants in an amazing cultural shift that will offer young people unparalleled opportunities. As we engage in this period of change, the liberal arts education provides some connection to our past, some comfort in our present, and some hope for our future.

Lynne Cheney, who chairs the National Endowment for the Humanities, has called the humanities the "civic glue which binds us." The liberal arts education with its emphasis upon the humanities offers students a sense of belonging to the culture and a chance to consider the really important issues of life in an age of technology.

Consequently, a liberal arts education, as the central core of instruction, should be available to all students. These young people will choose their own areas of specialization later in life, but will benefit tremendously from early exposure to the humanities. The aspirations of today's students and the continuation of a democracy require that future leaders receive a liberal arts education and wide exposure to the humanities.

That future society, which is developing now, will demand tough decisions from young people in respect to the education they receive and use, the kinds of employment they seek and obtain, the family responsibilities they choose and that are forced upon them, and the variations of self-fulfillment activities they develop and enjoy. These four aspects of life are areas where every student must be prepared to take the next step.